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SUBJECT: RRT Erbil: The 1991 Generation on College, Jobs

This is an Erbil Regional Reconstruction Team cable.

1. (U) Summary: Given that half of the Kurdistan Region's population is under 25, understanding the concerns of the so-called "1991 Generation" -- those born during or after the Kurdish Uprising -- is key to understanding the Region's future. Right now, the Generation's primary concern is getting into college. The entrance process hinges on an outdated Region-wide exam that awards lucrative majors to those with high marks, undesirable majors to those with low marks, and which leaves thousands of young people frozen out of higher education. The KRG's Minister of Higher Education, Dr. Idris Salih, has worked to meet the increasing demand by presiding over an unprecedented expansion of private universities and fighting for resources from Baghdad to send hundreds of the Region's students abroad, mostly to the UK. While Dr. Idris and his colleagues are working with Appalachian State University on a joint KRG and QRF and Public Affairs-funded project to overhaul the Region's Ba'athist-era curriculum, students at public universities still complain about poor facilities, chronic resource shortages, and political interference in which graduates get jobs and/or opportunities for graduate study. This frustration has prompted many students to look for ways to study abroad and stay there, while others look for ways to join the already bloated government workforce. There is also the beginning of a reverse brain-drain, with small numbers of talented students and scholars -- including Fulbright alumni -- returning to the Region to take up influential positions in government and academia. Looking to the future, higher education experts see the continued expansion of private universities and a shift to vocational training as key to meeting the 1991 Generation's demands.
End summary.

Context: The 1991 Generation is Key

2. (U) With a median age of 20 and more than 50 percent of its population under the age of 25, young people are the Kurdistan Region's most important demographic group. This so-called "1991 Generation" -- those born during or immediately after the Kurdish uprising that followed the Gulf War -- is a tech-savvy generation with a firm grasp of the latest social networking technology, including Facebook and MySpace. It is a generation impatient for economic and political change in the Region.

School Daze: High Demand for a College Education...

3. (U) As would be expected with such a young median age, the majority of the Region's population is in some sort of school, with the number of students increasing dramatically every year. As of the end of February, there were 75,000 students in their final year of secondary school, many of whom see a university degree as critical to future job opportunities. The KRG is struggling to meet that huge demand. In 2008, 33,992 students (out of 55,000 who completed secondary school) passed the memorization-intensive, Region-wide college entrance exam. Only 15,000 of these were accepted into the Region's 23 public institutions of higher learning, all of which provide a government-paid four-year education. This crunch was exacerbated last year by Kurdistan Region President Masoud Barzani, who, directed that college-aged IDPs (many of whom are Yezidis) be shoehorned into the Region's public universities.

14. (U) Fortunately for the 1991 Generation, one of the KRG's most talented ministers is the Minister of Higher Education, Dr. Idris Qtalented ministers is the Minister of Higher Education, Dr. Idris Salih. Dr. Idris and his Director General-level colleagues have attempted to meet the growing demand for higher education by encouraging the growth of tuition-charging western-standard private universities, including the American University of Iraq-Sulaimaniyah and the University of Kurdistan-Hawler, and by working hard to secure money from Baghdad to send hundreds of the Region's students abroad for undergraduate study and advanced degrees.

15. (U) During a recent meeting with RRT PD officers, Dr. Idris noted that the Region now has eight private universities with another three (branches of major universities in India, Jordan, and Egypt), in the pipeline. Dr. Idris explained that the majority of the Region's scholarship students are getting their degrees in the United Kingdom simply because getting a UK visa is a lot easier and quicker than getting a U.S. visa. According to him, American universities are losing a lot of Iraqi tuition money because of what he passionately argues is an overly-restrictive U.S. student visa policy. (Note: Private institutions in the Region charge tuition, sometimes at European rates. While academic standards are higher at some private universities, the cost of tuition puts private education beyond the reach of many. End note.)

Ba'athist Era Educational Model Doesn't Meet Modern Needs

16. (U) Students in the Kurdistan Region who attend public

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universities complain about chronic resource shortages, interference by the Region's two main political parties, the KDP and PUK, and a rigid system that arbitrarily assigns majors to people based on the results of the college entrance exam. Students grouse that those who score high on the exam get plum majors, like medicine, engineering, and information technology, while those at the lower end of the curve get less desirable majors such as Arabic and agriculture.

17. (U) Similarly vexing is the role that political connections play in the pursuit of post-graduate study and employment. Many students interviewed by RRT Officers said they had planned to pursue post-graduate studies at Kurdistan Region universities but were denied the opportunity to do so because they did not know the "right person" or were not from the "right" political party. Students also complain that party-associated nepotism and cronyism have created a system in which unqualified people receive government positions and qualified people are denied the opportunity to work. "A man with no formal education will get four stars on his shoulder because he knows someone, while a man with a university degree will have to sit in his father's house because he cannot get a job," said one student.

Going Forward: Some Want Out...

18. (U) The majority of the students interviewed by RRT Officers over the past several months expressed a desire to leave the Kurdistan Region after graduation in order to pursue graduate study or seek challenging employment opportunities. Students complain that outdated, Ba'athist-era university curriculum and substandard lab facilities, among other things, prompted them to think about studying abroad. "Our studies here are completely theoretical," said a third-year Biology major at Duhok University. "We have one lab with very old equipment and there is not enough space for all the students who need to use the lab. How can I learn biology from a book?" While many students plan to return to the Region after obtaining international study and work experience, others confided that their willingness to return would depend on the degree to which the KRG creates a hospitable environment for progressive ideas, and economic and political development.

...Some Are Coming Back and Making a Difference...

¶9. (U) While many students undoubtedly look to leave the Kurdistan Region, it also true that the Region is benefiting from a reverse brain drain, with many talented students and scholars returning from study and/or long periods of exile in the United States and Europe. This trend is perhaps best represented by the Kurdistan Region students who were in the extraordinary first post-Saddam Fulbright cohort, several of whom have moved into influential staff positions in the KRG and the Baghdad office of Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih. (Note: It was a returned Fulbright alum who helped orchestrate the recent Iraqi Government decision to match, dollar-for-dollar, USG funding for the Fulbright program this year. End note.) Moreover, university presidents throughout the Region have told us that, generally speaking, Kurdistan Region students studying in the United Kingdom come back during their holiday periods to visit professors and schmooze businessmen, clearly laying the groundwork for an eventual return.

...but Most Are Looking to the Government for Work

¶10. (U) RRT Officers also met a substantial group of students for whom the ultimate prize is government employment -- and with good reason. Those who obtain government positions here work from 10:00 a.m. to 4 p.m. and receive numerous allowances. Once they retire (at a time of their choosing, since there is currently no mandatory retirement age for KRG employees), they receive a pension of 80 percent of their salary for the rest of their lives. As one recent university graduate in Erbil put it: "Why shouldn't I want to work for the government? The government will guarantee me a life." But there is another incentive to seek government employment: the lack of a viable alternative. The private sector in the KR is extremely small and unable to absorb the abundant supply of newly-minted university graduates.

¶11. (U) Since the KRG announced a hiring freeze last year, many of the Region's graduating students have begun to panic. But despite indications that the government will be unable to hire the majority of the KR's expected graduates, educators and businessmen throughout the Region say current students seem unable to plan for an alternative to government employment. Said Ayad Abdul-Rahman, Chairman of the Duhok Chamber of Commerce: "Students have been told since they were small to work hard, go to university, and plan to get a nice, secure government job. They are unable to think of a world in which that might not happen." Many of our interlocutors stressed that this is a social stability issue the KRG cannot ignore. As one university professor told RRT Officers, "The government must be more careful with these young people. They were

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born after Anfal, after the Region was created. They have higher expectations of and less patience for the government's mistakes than we do."

Possible Fixes: Curriculum Reform and Vocational Training

¶12. (U) Looking down the road, Minister of Higher Education Dr. Idris is banking on curriculum reform, currently being undertaken as part of a major KRG, QRF and Public Affairs-funded project with Appalachian State University, and the expansion of private universities to help soak up the Region's excess student capacity and nurture the entrepreneurial spirit needed to bolster the Region's economy. However, another of the Region's Higher Education superstars, Duhok University President Dr. Asmat Khalid, sees another solution: expanded vocational training. "We are not training students to perform the different types of work that have to be done here. We are training students to get degrees. 80 percent of the students in the Kurdistan Region who get degrees in social sciences have no idea how they will use what they learned." The lack of vocational training has led to a dearth of local skilled

labor, particularly in the construction industry. (Note: Skilled labor is usually imported from Turkey and other neighboring countries. End Note) Dr. Asmat said the importance and value of strong vocational training was underscored for him during a recent visit to the United States along with several other university presidents from around Iraq.

Comment

¶13. (U) There is an intense interest among young people here in studying in the United States. Large groups of enthusiastic students have turned out for lectures by American professors that the RRT has brought to the Kurdistan Region for short speaking tours, and an extraordinary U.S.-election day video teleconference between students at the University of Kurdistan-Hawler and the University of Massachusetts received wide press coverage in the Region. Interaction with universities in the UK and Europe simply don't generate the same kind of buzz.

¶14. (U) We would note that Embassy Baghdad's Consular Section has made significant progress in improving the visa experience for Iraqi students, for example by interviewing them in Baghdad instead of requiring them to go to U.S. embassies in neighboring countries. However, it isn't visa policy alone that is driving many Iraqi students with federal government scholarships to study in the UK and Europe. Iraqi students are also hamstrung by a lack of access to student advising services. Indeed, a key MoHE official recently told visiting Embassy Baghdad officers that there are significant numbers of Iraqi students with scholarships who simply can't determine where they should study in the United States. Conversely, for students looking to study in the UK, a very large and active British Council office in Erbil provides first-rate advising services.

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